TRAILING THE MOVIE GERM TO ITS BIRTHPLACE

By HERBERT A. PIERCE

Illustration by L. M. GLACKENS

Father was told what was at the Peep Show, and urged to take the family, just as Father now is importuned to escort the home outfit around to the movies

ALTHOUGH popular opinion places motion pictures among the nouveau riche of modern industries, the amusement which is patronized by 10,000,000 persons in the United States alone has an ancestry which rivals that of many noble houses Europe. In the days when the exiled House of Stuart was plotting a return to the English throne pictures, under the name of raree-shows, were a recognized institution and furnished thrills for thousands.

City and country, camp and court eagerly greeted these "peep shows" (another alias for the embryo movies) and gasped at the crude wonders portrayed. As in modern days a recreation-seeking business man scans advertisements for the newest reels, so did the burgher of ruffles and knee breeches, on entering his lattice-windowed home, reach for the dingily printed News Letter to obtain advice on the best raree-shows. Dames and daughters in farthingales smoothed the powder out of many a tired daddy's wig in their wheedlings to get the needed pence to gaze upon the scenes in the traveling showman's box.

Most persons are content to trace the germ of the cinema no further back than the tiny moving pictures that used to be exhibited in a series of boxes where the spectator moved from one to the other about the room, lingering at the one which interested him most. New Yorkers who are interested in novelties, and who sought them in the show exhibited by the Biograph in empty stores in Fourteenth Street, do not have to be old to have these recollections.

But they do not always realize that these moving pictures—tiny figures of prizefights, horse races, etc.—were not created out of a void, but were what may be called a step forward from the forgotten peep show of the eighteenth century. In the first half of that changeful era one simple and innocent amusement to be had in the great cities London and Paris was imported to New York and had considerable vogue here. What these raree-shows were is only to be known by means of the pictures in the possession of collectors of the rare and the antique. A comprehensive collection of them can be seen at the Public Library.

Curiosity in the eighteenth century was whetted in a manner similar to that of to-day, and accounts of these early pictures and of the interest of the people in them bear close resemblance to present movie gossip. After all, the new development appeals to the same instinct that existed in peep show days—the universal interest in pictures of current events, crimes and sports.

In 1770 or thereabouts true pictures—that is, pictures from life—were not required any more than they are to-day in the movies. If the pictures of the peep show man were plausible they had a great success. The peep show pictures of life in New York, which are displayed in the library exhibition referred to, are palpably false. They are engraved in line and highly colored, and the colors are no truer to life than the lines are. In the series of New York views are "The Destruction of King George's Statue," "The Terrible Fire of 1776," "The Triumphal Entry of the Royal Troops" and views of New York City. Two of the latter have a notation on them that they "are sold at Augsburg," which notation is in the French language. These views of the city are reversed and meant to be viewed as reflected in a mirror, being true "peep show prints."

Other prints show views of various cities and scenes in other parts of the world. All are highly colored, and contemporary writers speak of the "screechy colors" of these pictures made for the common people. This criticism applied particularly to the prints made in Paris for the Optique, a collection of "vues" taken about the country by the "raree" man.

The Optique was an apparatus for viewing the shows that came largely in vogue about the year 1730. At once sprang up a large business of providing prints for it, and the whole world had to be ransacked for subjects, just as it is being searched for interesting locations for cinema pictures.

"The print makers," says Bonnardot in his History of Engraving in France, "set about procuring or utilizing thousands of views of monuments or cities. Rigaud's collection of views seems to have been arranged for that use. One often finds for sale good pieces by Silvestre, Perelle and La Belle with a paste of ignoble coloring. These views have the disadvantage of showing objects reversed, being destined to be reflected by a mirror.

"The print sellers of the Rue St. Jacques and the Rue St. Jean de Bauvais issued enormous bundles of these optical views. The house of Basset, which still exists, corner of Rue de Mathurins, was most celebrated in this specialty."

John Bowles and Carington Bowles were London producers of "peep show" pictures. A part of the latter's New Enlarged Catalogue is given up to peep show pictures. The prints sold for sixpence plain and a shilling colored unless they were of a special interest or workmanship, as the "Perspective Views of Shipping of the cities of London and Westminster and views in England, France and America," when the price was doubled. Good, bad or indifferent, all the prints were designed to be shown "with surprising beauty and effect in the optical pillar machine or diagonal mirror." These mirrors sold for a guinea each.

As with most devices, the diagonal mirror was first designed for the instruction and amusement of children, but, the views becoming more important and more money being spent on the "optique," it passed out of the toy realm and grave personages took a lively interest in it. In books of record and serious memoirs one finds data of purchases made of prints to complete the collection for this or that country house, and our ancestors used them to while away the tedium of country life.

This vogue was true in France as in England, but it was a passing one, and toward the end of the eighteenth century we find the peep show going back to its first admirers, children and villagers at the fair. There, however, it had a long life. The showman who went about the country carrying on his back a box fitted up wnth a mirror was a welcome addition to any country fair or market day, and his charge for seeing his stock of pictures, which he manipulated by means of strings, was not heavy, not above the resources of the yokels.

New York had prints of its own, and one of these most popular of these represents Uncle Sam as a Peep Show Man. The traditional figure is engaged in "stringing up" a party of unreconciled rebels, while "Jeff" Davis watches the tragedy through a window. Other peep show prints frequently found in the New York collections are views of life in China, street scenes, etc., with numerous pictures of Italian country life.

There are men still living who can recall going to peep shows on lower Broadway, and sometimes these were "features" of the so-called museums which were popular both before and after the Civil War. Immediately following the war the stereoscope came to rival the old peep show and practically to put it out of business.

But to persons born about the time of our Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and later the peep show was but a vague thing, a name and nothing more. To their children the peep show is not even that, and when these come upon references to the peep show in Victorian novels they do not understand. A peep show, defined, is a small show viewed through an orifice or hole fitted with a magnifying glass. Through this lens colored pictures are seen when they are placed horizontally at the bottom of the box, and these appear to be far off by means of a mirror inclined at 45 degrees.

These pictures, and others on the page, are from an early Dutch Peep Show

It was the dexterity of the peep show man in pulling the string that made him successful. Until he could get this effect of motion into his manipulation of a series he was not counted as an "artist." A series shown in New York before the war took the spectator into the streets of Peking, and here dexterity must have been essential. The peep show man who could handle the strings and produce the effect of one street succeeding another as it might do while a traveler was wandering about them could always command his audience.

Apparently the peep show reached these shores in 1748, for all references made to it in letters, news sheets, etc., before this date have London or Paris as a background. But in this year one John Bonnin arrived from abroad with a philosophical optical machine. He exhibited on the street corners in fair weather and in shops in rainy or snowy times a series that he called "perspectives." Bonnin's show is mentioned in The New York Post Boy.

Throughout the century artists of fame did not disdain to introduce in their more elaborate works the figure of the peep show man. He appears in several tapestry designs by Boucher, and he is particularly prominent in that artist's canvas "Fete de Campagne." He is the hero no less of the picture "Le Charletan," attributed to J. M. B. Pierre, and he is a leading figure in Lancret's group of itinerant merchants, figuring in the tripartite title of the picture as "The Optique Shower."

The show was known to many lands, and has been frequently pictured as the various titles indicate. Opinion seems to hold that the first traveling peep show men were the Savoyards. A Dutch dictionary defines the showman with the box as "a Savoyard with the rare-kiek." The English variety may be studied in the books already named and in Hogarth's Southwark Fair and Rowlandson's Characteristic Sketches. French interest in the peep show has been plainly indicated, and there is almost as great interest manifested in contemporary German literature. A Dutch series having The Kermesses for a general title reveals in a clearer degree how truly the germ of the movie lay latent in the raree. There are lively scenes of couples meeting and the gallant Hollander asking his fair one to accompany him to the magic peep show. She accepts, and we are shown the pair approaching the box, paying down the pfennig or two, gluing their eyes to the peephole and finally the pictures they had the rapture of seeing.

Frank Weitenkampf has written an engrossing monograph on peep show prints, in which he quotes from Mayhew, who had an interview with a showman. Thus speaks the showman: "There are two kinds of shows (peep shows), back shows and caravan shows. The back shows are peep shows that stand upon trussels and are so small as to admit of being carried on the back. The scenery is about 18 inches to 24 inches long and 15 inches high. They have been introduced fifteen or sixteen years. The back shows generally exhibits plays wot's been performed at the theayters lately. I has some other scenes as well. I've 'Napoleon's Return From Helba,' 'Napoleon at Waterloo,' 'The Death of Lord Nelson,' and also 'The Queen Embarking to Start for Scotland From the Dockyard at Woolich.' In the country I vorks my battle pieces. 'That there,' I tell 'em, 'is a fine paintin' representing Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar. In the center is Lord Nelson in his last dying moments, supported by Captain Hardy and the chaplain. On the left is the explosion of one of the enemy's ships by fire.'"

"The peep show," says Dr. Weitenkampf, "was the central figure of some works of popular literature, such as Mogridge's Sergeant Bill and his Raree Show, and The Peep Show Man: a drama, in two acts, by Thomas J. Williams. In this play Jack Trudget carries the show on his back and introduces a 'grand broadsword combat for the championship between the Emperor Napoleon and the Duke of Wellington, at the battle of Bunker's Hill.'"

Peep or raree show it was in England and the United States, optique it was called in France, guckkasten was its title in German, kiek-kasten, or perspektivkasse in Danish, rare-kiek, or kijk-kas in Dutch, but in every land and under any name it was always the same thing—a lot of prints or pictures colored without much art, but boldly, so as to make an appearance of brilliancy, and depending greatly on the skill of the showman in two ways—how he pulled the strings and what he said about his pictures—for their effect on an audience. The history of the peep show, in whatever land it is sought, is mysterious, principally because it sought out untrodden ways for its exploitation.

"To-day," says the latest authority on this history, "ideas concerning the peep show are already dimmed and confused, so that the word is getting to be as loosely used as the abused term 'hurdygurdy,' which is customarily and quite erroneously applied to the hand-organ of the piano type. About all that remains of this form of amusement is pictures of the show and prints that were used for it."

THE PRICE OF HER SILENCE

By FREDERIC BOUTET

Translated by William L. McPherson

HIS midday meal over, M. Buchêne was in the habit of smoking a cigar before returning to his office. While he puffed peacefully he talked matters over with his wife. In the early days of his marriage he had found this intermission hour delightful. Mme. Buchêne, quitting her place opposite him, used to come and sit beside him. The cigar went out. They kissed each other fervently. These ardors had abated in time, and now storm clouds sometimes threatened the serenity of their conversation.

This day, after lighting his cigar, M. Buchêne said:

"My dear Suzanne, I have something to say to you about your brother Maxime."

Mme. Buchêne stiffened up. But he took no notice of that and continued in his grave, precise and gentle manner, which now irritated Suzanne, although she had formerly been greatly impressed by it.

"Yes, he makes me uneasy. You know with what pleasure I took him into my office six months ago. I wanted to oblige you and your parents."

"It was perfectly natural," Suzanne interrupted. "Maxime had just finished his law course and there was every chance that a young man, intelligent, distinguished and of good family—your brother-in-law, in the bargain—would give you better service and command your confidence more readily than some outsider, even though the latter might be older and more serious."

"Serious! That's just what Maxime isn't. That's what worries me. Let him be frivolous, neglectful, inexact! Mon Dieu! I didn't expect anything else. But for some time past he has been running wild. I don't mean love affairs. At his age that would be excusable. It's something else. He gambles. He spends his nights at the poker table. He comes in in the morning pale, restless, overstrained. When he sits down he can hardly keep his eyes open. This morning I asked him for a letter. He started suddenly out of a doze and answered: 'I have a king full.' And he plays for big stakes. I've found that out. Now, gambling is a dangerous thing, my dear Suzanne. I don't know whether you realize that or not. I wish you would give him a word of caution, for he loves you and respects you. Or your parents might do it. I shall not intervene myself unless he persists in taking such chances."

"Don't get excited, please," said Suzanne, mockingly. "It sounds like a speech out of a melodrama. And I am sure the information your spies brought you about Maxime is mostly exaggeration. Suppose he plays now and then—there's no harm in it. I would play myself, for amusement, if I had a chance. We aren't like you, ponderous, solemn, doing everything by weight and measure. We are imaginative and nervous. We are alive. Besides, Maxime would probably be a little more interested in your business if you had encouraged him by showing complete confidence in him and making him your second in command, instead of treating him like a boy, a person of no consequence. He is conscious of his worth and his feelings have been hurt. I know that."

M. Buchêne shrugged his shoulders.

"Mon Dieu! My dear child, Maxime is a delightful fellow, a perfect dancer, an accomplished man of the world. I don't dispute it. But to trust him with my business! Pretty soon you wouldn't be able to pay your dressmaker's bills. He would ruin us with the best intentions in the world. He is as fantastic as you are. You both take after your father, who has been mixed up in his lifetime in a hundred foolish enterprises. In fact, I still wonder why he has lost only half of his fortune."

Suzanne was red with anger.

"Papa is a superior man, whom you aren't capable of understanding."

She looked her husband full in the face and added, emphasizing her words:

"In any case, you oughtn't to permit yourself to criticize another family when you have in your own family an Uncle Arsène, a bankrupt."

M. Buchêne now grew red.

"What? What are you saying?" he stammered.

"I am telling the truth. I also know something. I refrained out of politeness from alluding to this before, but since you force me to it, I repeat: When one has in his family a bankrupt like Uncle Arsène he avoids criticizing a family as honorable and eminent as mine. I will remind you of that fact again, if it is necessary."

She went out and slammed the door. M. Buchêne was crushed. Uncle Arsène was the Buchêne black sheep. He had sprung, some fifty-five years before, from the loins of that economic and virtuous family, a troublemaker from his boyhood, showing as a young man an unnatural taste for prodigality and debauchery. He made two marriages—one of them scandalous—and then failed disastrously in a business venture, undertaken in the hope of recovering the fortune he had dissipated. They knew that he had settled down somewhere in the country and was managing a disreputable café.

M. Buchêne let his burned-out cigar drop. The revamping of this old story filled his mind with bitterness. He was dumfounded that his wife knew all the details. It was a powerful weapon for her, and she would use it mercilessly. He had no doubt about that. What kind of life would he lead henceforth, if whenever a disagreement arose the scandalous doings of Uncle Arsène were to be thrown at his head!

But he judged Mme. Buchêne by himself. She didn't do as he would have done. She didn't employ the direct method of attack and never mentioned the name which her cowed husband expected to have sprung on him at any moment. She contented herself, when she was annoyed (and that was frequently), with praising her own family, whose honor had never been tarnished within the memory of men. She abounded in examples of worthiness which she had drawn from the lives of her parents, her grandparents and her remoter ancestors. Family tradition had preserved these noble memories.

Mme. Buchêne thus tormented M. Buchêne. He felt his dignity as a man and a husband torn to shreds. He suffered in silence. Perhaps to soften Mme. Buchêne, who showed a tendency to abuse her victory, he became extremely considerate to Maxime. He initiated him into the secrets of the business, gave him the keys to his desk, absolved him from appearing at the office in the morning and, like an elder brother, advised him to take his fling.

Some weeks passed. One evening, as M. and Mme. Buchêne had just finished dinner, a servant announced Maxime.

"Mon Dieu, what's the matter?" cried Mme. Buchêne, alarmed by her brother's pallor and air of suppressed excitement.

He waited until the servant had gone, closed the door behind her, and then turned toward his brother-in-law.

"I have something to tell you," he said breathlessly, "something frightful! I am—I am a scoundrel. No, Suzanne, keep quiet. I have betrayed his confidence. I have committed—I have committed a forgery. I imitated his signature on a draft, which I had cashed. I had lost. It was a debt of honor. I hoped to win something back—to take up the draft. Since then I have been in despair. I have tried to raise money. I have failed. To-morrow the draft will be presented. That's all. How did I do such a thing?"

He crumpled up, sobbing, at his brother-in-law's feet. M. Buchêne lifted him up calmly, without any show of anger.

"Gambling is very dangerous, as I have always said," he began slowly. "Here is the draft. Its genuineness was called in question. They asked me if it was my signature. I said yes and I paid it."

He stopped, relighted his cigar and with the same match burned the draft to a cinder.

"Let us wipe it out," he resumed, not noticing that his metaphors were mixed. "Your despair, my boy, proves your repentance. Calm yourself. I pardon you and I will keep the secret of your youthful fault. What family, for that matter, has nothing with which to reproach itself? But when one has true consideration he never advertises the dishonor of those who are near to him," he concluded, giving Mme. Buchêne, now livid, a look charged with assurance and triumph.